



# BIOGRAPHY

**Legendary Col. Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, the most decorated Marine in Corps history, was famous for remarks made during the battle at Chosin Reservoir.**



## Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller

**(1898 - 1971)**

The younger Marines in the 1st Marines were ecstatic when they learned their regiment was going to be commanded by the legendary "Chesty" Puller. Older officers and noncommissioned officers in the regiment were less enthusiastic. They remembered the long casualty list the 1st Marines had suffered at Peleliu while under Colonel Lewis Burwell Puller's command. His style was to lead from the front, and, when he went into Korea, he already had an unprecedented four Navy Crosses.

Born June 26, 1898, Puller had grown up in the Tidewater region of Virginia where the scars of the Civil War were still unhealed and where many Confederate veterans were still alive to tell a young boy how it was to go to war. Lewis (which is what his family always called him) briefly went to Virginia Military Institute but dropped out in August 1918 to enlist in the Marines. To his disappointment, the First World War ended before he could get to France. In June 1919, he was promoted to second lieutenant and then, 10 days later, with demobilization was placed on inactive duty. Before the month was out he had re-enlisted in the Marines specifically to serve as a second lieutenant in the Gendarmerie d'Haiti. Most of the officers in the Gendarmerie were white Marines; the rank and file were black Haitians. Puller spent five years in Haiti fighting "Caco" rebels and making a reputation as a bush fighter. He also demonstrated the rapid marching, aggressive tactics and lead-from-the-front style that became his hallmarks.

Puller returned to the states in March 1924 and received his regular commission in the Marine Corps. During the next two years he did barracks duty in Norfolk, attended Basic School in Philadelphia, served in the 10th Marines at Quantico, Va., and had an unsuccessful try at aviation at Pensacola, Fla. Barracks duty for two years at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, followed Pensacola. Then in 1928 he was assigned to the Guardia Nacional of Nicaragua. Here in 1930 he earned his first Navy Cross. First Lieutenant Puller, his citation reads, "led his forces into five successive engagements against superior numbers of armed bandit forces."

He came home in July 1931 to the yearlong Company Officers Course at Fort Benning, Ga. That taken, he returned to Nicaragua for more bandit fighting and a second Navy Cross, this time for taking his patrol of 40 Nicaraguans through a series of ambushes, in partnership with the almost equally legendary Gunnery Sergeant William A. "Iron Man" Lee.

Now a captain, Puller came back to the West Coast in January 1933, stayed a month, and then left to join the Legation Guard at Peiping — Old Peking, present-day Beijing. This included command of the fabled "Horse Marines." In September 1934, he left Peiping to become the commanding officer of the Marine detachment on board the *USS Augusta*, flagship of the Asiatic Fleet.

In June 1936, he came to Philadelphia to instruct at the Basic School. His performance as a tactics instructor and on the parade ground left its mark on the lieutenants who would be the captains, majors and lieutenant colonels in the world war that was coming.

In June 1939, he went back to China, returning to the *Augusta* to command its Marines once again. A year later he left the ship to join the 4th Marines in Shanghai. He returned to the United States in August 1941, four months before America entered the war, and was given command of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, at Camp Lejeune, N.C. He commanded — he would say "led" — this battalion at Guadalcanal in the South Pacific and received his third Navy Cross for his successful defense of a mile-long line on the night of Oct. 24, 1942. His half-

2 strength battalion held off an entire Japanese regiment, killing more than 1,400 of the enemy. The fourth Navy Cross came for overall performance, from Dec. 26, 1943 to Jan. 19, 1944, at Cape Gloucester as executive officer of the 7th Marines. During February 1944, he took command of the 1st Marines and led it in the terrible fight at Peleliu during September and October.

Afterwards, he came back to command the Infantry Training Regiment at Camp Lejeune. Next he was Director of the 8th Marine Corps Reserve District with headquarters in New Orleans, and then took command of the Marine Barracks at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. After the Korean War broke out, he hammered Headquarters Marine Corps to be given command — once again — of his old regiment, the 1st Marines. He took command during August 1950 at Camp Pendleton, Calif., and soon led his men to Korea.

On Sept. 15, 1950, Puller and his men made the landing at Inchon. Within two weeks they had recaptured Seoul. Within two months Puller and the rest of the 1st Marine Division would find themselves in the bitter cold of the Chosin Reservoir far into North Korea. They were surrounded by a much larger Chinese force. Casualties were high but the division fought its way out intact. Puller was awarded an unprecedented fifth Navy Cross for his inspirational leadership during the withdrawal. During January 1951, he received a brigadier general's stars and assignment as the assistant division commander, First Marine Division. During May, he made his way back to Camp Pendleton to command the newly activated 3d Marine Brigade that became the 3d Marine Division. He moved to the Troop Training Unit, Pacific, Coronado, Calif., during June 1952 and later moved east — now with the two stars of a major general — to Camp Lejeune to take command of the 2d Marine Division in July 1954. His health began to fail and he was retired for disability on Nov. 1, 1955. From then until his death Oct. 11, 1971, at age 73, he lived in the little town of Saluda in Tidewater Virginia.

— Special thanks to reitred Brig. Gen. Edwin H. Simmons for his piece on Puller. Items from ABC-CLIO Publishing's *Encyclopedia of the Korean War* were added to his text.